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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Mother's Union, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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* E/CN.6/2006/1.



Statement

Link between gender inequality and uneven development

Since world governments acknowledged that *women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society...are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace*¹, the Millennium Development Goals² (MDGs) have become a focus for development efforts. Yet, inequality continues to widen, not only between richer and poorer nations but within them as well. Women, in particular, witness significantly less improvement in their daily lives than men in the same countries. Despite some progress, including reductions in the number of people living in extreme poverty and in the education gender gap,³ women and girls still do not have equal access to the rights, resources and opportunities that will secure the participation envisaged in the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA). This results in slow and uneven development and the projected failure of meeting the MDGs.

Hindrances to women's participation that are experienced daily by MU members worldwide include:

1. Education

Mothers' Union members know that education empowers women and girls to create change for themselves and their community. They are discouraged that 94 countries have missed the MDG target of gender parity in primary education by 2005 and that world governments did not formally acknowledge this at the UN World Summit in September 2005. Recent figures from UNESCO reveal that 57% of the 100 million children still out of school are girls. School fees continue to be a major barrier to girls attending schools, as well as hidden costs for school equipment and preferences for boys' education over girls'.

Illiteracy amongst adult women is of particular concern to the Mothers' Union. Today, 600 million women are illiterate as compared with 320 million men.⁴ Efforts to improve girls' education must be coupled with the improved provision of literacy, numeracy and vocational training for adult women. As the BPfA recognises, equal access to education for women of *all* ages must be of strategic priority.

2. Health

Women's health is central to that of any family and community, yet for many Mothers' Union members healthcare is inaccessible, unaffordable and of low quality. Healthcare systems must be responsive to the needs of women, more medical staff must be trained, and more health centres/hospitals must be constructed. National commitments to resourced plans with realistic targets and timetables are needed.

There could be no starker difference between Mothers' Union members than in their experiences of reproductive health. In sub-Saharan Africa, women face a 1 in 16 risk of dying from pregnancy

¹ The Beijing Declaration was endorsed by all UN member states in September 1995

² 191 UN member states committed to meeting eight Millennium Development Goals by 2015

³ Progress of the World's Women 2005 UNIFEM

⁴ State of the World Population 2005 UNFPA

related causes, in industrialised countries the risk is 1 in 2,800.⁵ If the MDGs to reduce maternal mortality and halt HIV/AIDS are to be met, women must control their own fertility and underlying issues such as poverty, discrimination and violence must be addressed. Governments must ensure universal access to reproductive health by 2015, as promised in 1994⁶.

3. Work

Women constitute a growing presence in the labour force and hold the central caring role in the family. Yet, Mothers' Union members experience the consistent dismissal of these contributions, by those in their own families or communities and by policy makers. All development policies must reflect the totality of women's work, be it formal or informal, paid or unpaid, to ensure that they benefit women and men.

Women's economic rights such as the right to own and inherit property and to have equal access to assets and resources, including land, credit and technology, are vital. The Mothers' Union was encouraged that world governments recommitted in 2005⁷ to guaranteeing these rights and looks forward to their realisation.

An Enabling Environment for the Advancement of Women

Education, health and work are three areas where gender equality accelerates development for which social transformation, backed by enforceable laws and sufficient resources, is vital. To this end, the Mothers' Union promotes four principles:

1. A Holistic Environment

All development efforts, including interconnected issues such as peace, security and human rights, must address gender inequality and be aligned with the BPfA. Responding to criticism that the MDGs reduce the scope of gender equality, the 49th Commission on the Status of Women declared that *'the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action is essential to achieving the internationally agreed development goals'*. This was further recognised at the UN World Summit. Yet more must be done to address gender concerns: from national plans of action to meet the MDGs, to international mechanisms and instruments, such as the WTO and the UN Peace Building Commission.

Issues of gender equality are central to the Mothers' Union Literacy and Development Programme (MULDP). For example, literacy circles construct pie charts showing the number of hours women work each day compared with men. Participants are able to explore and evaluate the expectations around gendered roles in the home and community, and the possible solutions to the challenges thrown up by this exercise.

⁵ State of the World Population 2005 UNFPA

⁶ International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, 1994

⁷ UN World Summit, September 2005

2. An Empowering Environment

The MDGs depict women as passive 'tools' for development, for example as the 'pregnant mother', or the 'illiterate girl child'. However, the advancement of women requires a shift in this perception from mere recipients to promoters of change. It is about ensuring that marginalised voices are heard and acted upon. Only when all women are empowered to claim their rights will governments and policy makers be held to account for delivering their promises made at national or international levels.

The above issues of education, health and work are relevant here and strengthen women's capacities to realise their rights. However, other key factors are regularly overlooked, such as the right to be free from the fear of violence and conflict. The recent UN World Summit recognised this and committed to eliminating all forms of violence against women, but the Mothers' Union stresses that words alone will not achieve this end, resources, laws and political will are essential.

The MULDP empowers women and communities to work together with their newfound skills and confidence to bring change to their lives. Annonciata from Burundi explained it thus: *"Now we shall sensitise others about the improved status of women. Women can now express their ideas and know their rights. We can participate in development. Widows can't be made homeless now."*

3. A Partnership Environment

Government-to-government partnership is central to development, although many current policies do not reflect the principles of equality implicit in the idea of 'partnership'. However, governments alone cannot achieve gender equality, they must work with NGOs, faith groups, civil society and the private sector too. Governments must not overlook the positive impact that such partnerships can have in local communities. Such stakeholders not only need resources, but also increased access to UN, national and local government processes, such as the implementation and monitoring of the MDGs. It is essential that women participate just as much as men, not simply from outside political processes but from within as well.

Partnership is crucial when an aspect of women's rights is perceived as clashing with religion or culture. It is only when questions about certain cultural practises (such as female genital mutilation, the use of condoms or sexual rights) come from within a cultural lens that these tensions can be addressed and the association of women's rights with westernisation can be overcome. The Mothers' Union is aware that issues around gender equality continue to challenge the Anglican Communion and is keen to cultivate culturally sensitive dialogue on women's rights at all levels.

All Mothers' Union initiatives are led by members from local communities who have the necessary cultural understanding. For example, the Mothers' Union in Kitale, northern Kenya, runs a Female Genital Mutilation Education Programme, working to separate myth from reality.

4. An Inclusive Environment

Gender disparities hit women and girls the hardest, but all of society suffers. Initiatives must target women but should actively include men, necessary allies for change. Gender equality must not be sidelined as a 'women's' issue. Men must be empowered to be advocates of gender equality. This

includes a reassessment of male roles in the community, workplace and home in relation to female roles. This process is enhanced when women's needs and interests are not seen as one homogenous block of needs competing with men's. Gender inequality may, in fact, only be one of a number of intersecting differences, such as disability or ethnicity.

The MULDP includes both men and women. For Elizabeth from Malawi, this made a large difference to her husband's attitude towards the programme, her involvement in it and her role in the community: *"Before, my husband wouldn't let me join the programme. Now he sees what I can do and how it is helping us, it is him who reminds me to come to the sessions."*